

Seeing is Believing: A Historical Perspective on the Ontological Status of UFOs

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This paper will examine the ontological status of unidentified flying objects as it pertains to a series of Cold War United States Air Force investigations into unidentified aerial phenomena (also referred to as unidentified flying objects, or UFOs). Between 1947 and 1969, the USAF directed a number of projects meant to reveal the actual nature of UFOs. Project SIGN, the first of these inquiries, sought to discover whether or not these reported observations represented a national security threat. The answer being no,' in the many projects thereafter UFOs became objects of scientific interest.

Expert scientists from nearly every field of science were contracted for their assistance on identifying the true cause of the observation. Out in the world, the scientific community split into roughly three camps over the nature and existence of unidentified flying objects: there were the hard skeptics and non-believers; the cautiously curious; and the "true believers" who, in UFO witnessing, sought evidence of extraterrestrial intelligences. But within the boundaries of the sanctioned, federally-funded UFO investigations, scientists searched for all possible explanations for UFO phenomena, from the physical to the psychological. In over 80% of the tens of thousands of cases the Air Force programs reviewed, physical phenomena were accounted for as the cause but this leaves nearly 20% for which the conclusion was rendered Unknown.'

The question about the existence of a source for observed phenomena was always at the foreground of the investigations. In a majority of cases, actual phenomena fuel UFO reports; whether it was airplanes, meteors, meteorological phenomena, or the planet Venus, real physical objects account for a vast majority of reports. But what of those reports ultimately classed as unknown'? In his report-cum-expos of early Air Force investigative efforts, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (1956), former Project Blue Book director Captain Edward J. Ruppelt writes, "The hassle over the word proof' boils down to one question: What constitutes proof?... There are certain definite facts that can be gleaned from [a report]; the pilot did see something and he did shoot at something, but no matter how thoroughly you investigate the incident that something can never be positively identified." Some sightings might be psychological, as with hallucinations; but surely, Ruppelt argues, not all of them are. Likewise, in a set of anonymous survey interviews conducted by astronomer J. Allen Hynek in 1952, Astronomer R argues that as late as 1800 meteorites were thought impossible and that it would be folly to suggest that "a century and a half later all the physical phenomena that exist have been discovered." Status report after status report supports the position that reported observations, in a gross majority of cases, are being generated by real phenomena. (And the reports in which this is not the case are easily identifiable, based on the character of the witness.)

Historians of science are often quick to suggest ways in which their case studies and methodologies can be better applied to critical issues in the philosophy of science. But here, I attempt to work in the other direction, demonstrating how philosophical questions about the ontological status of scientific objects shapes methods of scientific inquiry and assumptions about observers and witnessing. (These assumptions work in multiple directions, as lay observers make claims on scientific authority based on their understanding of the importance of the empirical in the practical sciences.) Drawing on Hacking, Cartwright, and discussions around scientific realism, I will demonstrate how philosophical concerns about theoretical and un-seeable' objects do not pertain only to the problems of the microscopic world. Furthermore, I will discuss how understanding these central philosophical questions on real versus

immaterial objects is crucial to understanding, in this case, the UFO problem more broadly. The UFO case study allows us to see philosophy of science in action. It is a case of applied philosophy of science.

Additionally, I hope to demonstrate that, in these histories of “fringe” science, an integrated approach is necessary for a truly productive analysis. Historical concerns are entwined with philosophical ones; a straight-laced historical analysis will miss the critical ontological and epistemological concerns that lie at the heart of these little-studied historical moments, while a purely philosophical inquiry may fail at demonstrating the importance of these “weird” events in the larger historical context. Philosophical positions lay at the heart of practical decision making, on a scientific and political level, while a historical narrative illustrating the change of those positions over time can help illuminate how those questions shaped and were shaped by outside forces. This paper is part of a larger project that both recovers the history of USAF studies on unidentified aerial phenomena and explores knowledge creation, classification, and distribution in the face of ontologically-unsound phenomena.